

# *X Speech on the Right to Work<sup>1</sup>* (Tocqueville)

*Citizen de Tocqueville:* If I am not mistaken, you do not expect me to answer the last part of the speech that you have just heard. It contains the elaboration of a complete and complicated system to which I feel no obligation to oppose another system.

My aim here is simply to discuss the Amendment in favor of which, or rather concerning which, the preceding speaker has just spoken. What is this Amendment? What is its bearing? What is its fatal tendency, as I see it? This is what I have to examine.

First a word on the work of the Commission. The Commission, as the preceding speaker told you, really had two wordings, but basically it had, and continues to have, but a single thought. The words which have been pronounced in this tribune and elsewhere, and more meaningful than the words, the actions, have shown that the formulation first adopted was an incomplete and dangerous expression of its thought. The form has been rejected rather than the thought.<sup>2</sup>

This formulation is now revived. That is what confronts us.

<sup>1</sup> This speech was formally occasioned by the submission of an Amendment to paragraph 8 of the preamble to the Constitution of the Second French Republic, on September 12, 1848. The paragraph was the one which dealt with the State's social obligations. The Amendment of Mathieu (de la Drome) was an attempt to return to the initial wording of the Constitutional Committee of which Beaumont and Tocqueville were members. The point in question was the "Right to Work," the degree to which the individual could legally claim, or the State would legally admit, guaranteed employment to every able-bodied member of society. The initial wording (and the Amendment) implied a legal claim by every individual to the limit of the State's resources. The paragraph, as amended, implied only the duty of the State to general public assistance.

<sup>2</sup> For the biographical background to Tocqueville's role in the Revolution of 1848, see Gargan, *Alexis de Tocqueville: The Critical Years*, especially pp. 55-121.

The two variations are before us as they should be. Let us compare them in the new light of the facts.

In its second formulation, the Commission limits itself to imposing on society the duty to come to the aid of all hardships to the extent of its resources, be it by work, or by assistance strictly speaking. In saying this, the Commission undoubtedly wanted to impose a more extensive, more sacred obligation on the State than that which was required until now. But it did not want to create something absolutely new: it wanted to expand, consecrate, regularize public charity; it did not want to create anything other than public charity. The Amendment, on the contrary, does something different. Still more, the Amendment, with the meaning given to it in speeches and, above all, by recent actions, the Amendment, which grants to each individual the general, absolute, irresistible right to work, this Amendment necessarily leads to one of the following consequences. The State may undertake to provide work for all unemployed workers who come forward, in which case it is slowly drawn into the industrial process; and, as it is the ubiquitous industrial entrepreneur, the only one which cannot refuse employment, and the one which usually imposes the least work, it is inevitably driven to become the principal, and soon, in one way or another, the only industrial entrepreneur. Once that point is reached, taxation is no longer the means of running the governmental machinery, but the chief means of supporting industry. The State, by accumulating all individual capital in its hands, finally becomes the sole owner of all property. Well, that is communism. [*Disturbance.*]

On the other hand, the State might want to escape from the fatal logic which I have just outlined, might want to provide work for all workers who request it, not directly through its own resources, but by seeing to it that they find it in private industry. It is led fatally into attempting the regimentation of industry implied in the last speaker's system. It is obliged to ensure that there is no unemployment, it is necessarily led to distribute workers in such a way as to eliminate their competition with each other, and to regulate wages, sometimes in order to restrict pro-

duction, sometimes to accelerate it, in short, to make it the great and sole organizer of labor.<sup>3</sup> [*Stir in the Assembly.*]

Thus, although at first sight the wording of the Commission and that of the Amendment seem to converge, these two wordings will lead to quite contrary results. They are two roads, which, beginning at the same point, are finally separated by an immense gulf. One is ultimately an extension of public charity. At the end of the other, what do we see?—Socialism.

We must not deceive ourselves. Nothing is gained by postponing discussions whose principle involves the very basis of society and eventually comes to the surface in one way or another, sometimes in words and sometimes in actions. Today what is involved, perhaps unknown to its author but which I see as clear as day behind the Amendment of the honorable M. Mathieu, is socialism. . . . [*Prolonged disturbance—murmurs on the left.*]

Yes, gentlemen, sooner or later this question of socialism, which everybody fears and nobody dares to discuss, must come before this tribune. The Assembly must come to grips with it; we must relieve the country of the burden that it is made to bear by this idea of socialism. And I confess, this is largely why I came up to the tribune. The question of socialism must be resolved on this Amendment. It is necessary that we know, that the Assembly know, that all of France know, whether the February Revolution is or is not a socialist Revolution. [*Very good!*]

This is heard again and again. And behind the June barricades how many times did I not hear the piercing cry: *Long live the Democratic and Social Republic!*<sup>4</sup> What do these words mean? The answer must be known. The Assembly must state it. [*Agitation on the left.*]

The Assembly will understand that my intention here is not to examine all the various systems comprised under this word socialism. I merely want to identify briefly the characteristics

<sup>3</sup> The phrase “organizer of labor” is an obvious attempt to recall to the audience the proletarian demand for the “organization of labor” which had led to the national workshops of February 1848, and the bloody June Days four months later. See D. C. McKay, *The National Workshops; A Study in the French Revolution of 1848* (Cambridge, Mass., 1933).

<sup>4</sup> This was a common revolutionary slogan in 1848.

found in all these systems, and to see if the pattern revealed by these traits was the goal of the February Revolution.

If I am not mistaken, gentlemen, the first typical trait of all the systems which go under the name of socialism is an energetic continuous appeal to man's material passions. Thus, some have said that "it is a matter of rehabilitating the flesh." Others have said that "labor, even the hardest, must not only be useful but agreeable." Others have said that "men must be rewarded not in proportion to their merit, but in proportion to their needs." And finally I want to mention the ultimate socialist who informed you that the aim of the socialist system, and, according to him, the aim of the February Revolution, was to obtain unlimited consumption for everybody.

I am therefore right in saying that a characteristic and general trait of all socialist schools is an energetic appeal to man's material passions.

There is a second peculiarity. It is an attack, sometimes direct, sometimes indirect, but unending and continuous, on the very principles of individual property. From the first socialist, who said fifty years ago that property was the origin of all the world's evils,<sup>5</sup> to the socialist whom we heard here and who, less charitably than the first, by shifting from property to the proprietor, told us that property was theft,<sup>6</sup>—all, I say, attack individual property directly or indirectly. [*It's true! It's true!*] I don't pretend that all attack it in the bold, and, if I may add, the rather brutal manner adopted by one of our colleagues. But I say that all of them, if they do not destroy it, transform it, diminish it, constrain it, limit it, by more or less devious means, and make something else of it than the private property that we know and have known since the world began! [*Very vigorous signs of agreement.*]

<sup>5</sup> Tocqueville refers here to the writings of Gracchus Babeuf, as recounted by F. Buonarroti. See p. 188, note 10.

<sup>6</sup> Tocqueville refers here to Pierre-Joseph Proudhon's famous book *What is Property?*, first published in 1840. Proudhon (1809–1865) was one of the most influential social thinkers of the century and became canonized as a father of the Anarchist and Anarcho-Syndicalist movements. He was a representative to the Constituent Assembly in 1848. See G. Woodcock, *Pierre-Joseph Proudhon* (London, 1956).

We come to the third and last trait, the one which most clearly characterizes socialists of every stripe, of every school. It is a deep distrust of liberty, of human reason, a profound scorn for the individual in his own right, for the human condition. What characterizes all these men is a continuous, many-sided, incessant attempt to curtail, to restrain human freedom in every way; it is the idea that the State must not only direct society, but must be, so to speak, the master of every man, how should I put it—must be his master, his tutor, his schoolmaster; [*very good!*] it is the idea that for fear of letting a man fail, the State must always be beside him, above him, around him, in order to guide him, protect him, sustain him, restrain him. In short, it is more or less the confiscation of human freedom. [*More manifestations of agreement.*] If at this point I had to look for a definitive general conception to express what socialism as a whole appears to me to be, I would say that it is a new form of servitude. [*Vigorous approval.*]

You see, gentlemen, that I haven't gone into the details of these systems. I have sketched socialism in its principal traits. They are sufficient to identify it.

Wherever you see these traits, rest assured that socialism is present, and wherever you see socialism, be confident that these traits will be encountered.

Well, gentlemen, what does all this amount to? Is this, as has been so often proposed, the continuation, the legitimate complement, the perfecting of the French Revolution? Is it, as has been so often said, democracy's inevitable, natural development and completion? No, gentlemen, it is neither one nor the other. Recall the French Revolution, gentlemen. Return to the glorious and terrible origin of our modern history. Did the French Revolution, as a speaker claimed yesterday, achieve the great deeds which shone before the world by appealing to the baser feelings, to man's material needs? Do you believe that it is by speaking of wages, of well-being, of unlimited consumption, of the unlimited satisfaction of physical needs . . . ? [*Interruption by Citizen Mathieu (de la Drome)*]: I said nothing like that.

*Citizen de Tocqueville:* Do you believe that by so speaking, a whole generation was excited, quickened, armed, rushed to the

frontiers, cast amidst the hazards of war, confronted with death? No, gentlemen, no! These great things were done by speaking of higher and finer things, by speaking of love of country, of national honor, by speaking of virtue, of generosity, of disinterestedness, of glory. After all, gentlemen, there is but one real secret to making men do great things—by appealing to great feelings. [Very good! Very good!]

And property, gentlemen, property! Undoubtedly, the French Revolution waged a cruel, energetic war against some proprietors, but as for the principle of private property itself, it always respected and honored it. It placed property at the helm of its constitutions. No people have treated it more magnificently. They have engraved it on the title-page of their laws.

The French Revolution went further. It not only consecrated but distributed individual property. It caused a greater number of citizens to share in it. [Several exclamations: That's what we ask!]

And today, gentlemen, thanks to that event we do not have to fear evil consequences from the doctrines that the socialists are spreading through the country and within these very walls. Because the Revolution peopled France with ten million proprietors, we can allow your doctrines to be elaborated at this rostrum without danger. They can annoy society, but thanks to the French Revolution they will not prevail against it or destroy it. [Very good!]

And finally, gentlemen, as for liberty, one thing strikes me. The Old Regime, whose opinions admittedly differed from those of the socialists on many points, was far less removed from it in political ideology than one might think. All things considered, they are closer to each other than to us. The Old Regime, in effect, held that wisdom resides in the State alone; that its subjects were weak and crippled beings whom one must always lead by the hand, for fear that they might fall or hurt themselves; that it was good continually to limit, to counteract, to compress individual liberties, that it was necessary to regulate industry in order to stabilize the quality of products, to prevent free competition. On this point the Old Regime thought exactly like

today's socialists.<sup>7</sup> And where, I ask, was this opinion denied? By the French Revolution.

Gentlemen, what broke all these shackles which everywhere limited the free movement of people, of goods, of ideas? What restored man to his individual greatness, his true greatness? All the chains that you want to restore under another name were broken by the French Revolution. And this was not only the work of the Constituent Assembly, that immortal Assembly which founded liberty in France and throughout the world. Not the members of this illustrious Assembly alone rejected the Old Regime's doctrines. These Doctrines were equally rejected by the eminent men of all the Assemblies which followed. Even the representative of the Convention's bloody dictatorship did so. The other day I was reading his words again. Here they are:

"Shun," said Robespierre, "shun the old mania"—you see, it really isn't so new—[smiles] "Shun the old mania of wanting to govern too much; allow individuals and families the right to choose anything that does not harm others. Allow the communes the right to order their own affairs; in short, return to the free individual whatever has been illegitimately taken away, whatever does not necessarily belong to public authority."<sup>8</sup> [Stir in the Assembly.]

Gentlemen, some would have it that the whole great momentum of the French Revolution will end only with that society which the socialists joyfully conjure up for us—that regimented, regulated, formalized society where the State takes responsibility for everything and where the individual is nothing, where society accumulates unto itself, embodies in itself, all power and all life, where the goal assigned to man is well-being alone, a

<sup>7</sup> This point was elaborated six years later by Beaumont, in an article for the *Revue des deux mondes* in 1854 entitled "La Russie et les Etats-Unis sous le rapport économique."

<sup>8</sup> This is a quotation condensed from Robespierre's speech of May 10, 1793, on the subject of the Constitution of 1793. See Bouchez et Roux, *Histoire parlementaire de la Révolution française* (Paris, 1836), Vol. 26, 440. On Maximilien Robespierre (1758–1794), perhaps the most famous figure of the French Revolution, see J. M. Thompson, *Robespierre*, 2 vols. (New York, 1936).

society without air and almost without light. For them the French Revolution was made, for a beehive or beaver colony, for a society of skilled animals rather than of free and civilized men! And so many famous men died in battle or on the scaffold, so much glorious blood soaked the earth, so many passions were aroused, so much genius, so many virtues came into the world—for *this!*

No, no! I swear by those who succumbed for this great cause—no, they did not die for this, but for something greater, more sacred, more worthy of them and of humanity. [*Very good!*] If this was all that it amounted to, the Revolution was useless, a touched-up Old Regime would have sufficed. [*Prolonged reaction in the Assembly.*]

I said before that socialism claimed to be the legitimate development of democracy. I will not try like several of our colleagues to search out the true etymology of this word democracy. I will not grub in the garden of Greek roots, as was done yesterday, in order to find out where the word comes from. [*Laughter.*] I will seek out democracy where I have seen it, living, active, triumphant, in the only country on earth where it exists—where it has been able to establish something great and lasting in the modern world—in America.<sup>9</sup> [*Whispers.*]

There you will see a nation in which all conditions are even more equal than they are with us, where social conditions, customs, laws, all are democratic, where everything derives from and returns to the people, but where each individual enjoys a more complete independence and greater freedom than at any other time, or in any other country on earth.

As I said, observe an essentially democratic country, the only existing democracy in the world, the only truly democratic republic known to history. You would search in vain for socialism within these republics. Not only have socialist theories not taken

<sup>9</sup> On Tocqueville's use of America against socialism in France, see *Democracy in America*, Preface to the twelfth edition, 1848; and his "Adresse aux citoyens de Valognes," March 19, 1848, in *Assemblée Constituante, elections, La Manche—1848*. For the use of America against radical social doctrines during the Revolution of 1848, see René Rémond, *Les Etats-Unis devant l'opinion française*, II, 831–54.

hold of public life, but they have played so small a role in the discussion and affairs of that great nation that one has not even had the right to claim that people feared them!

Today America is the country where democracy is most completely practiced. It is also the one where socialist doctrines, which you claim to be so congruent with democracy, have the least currency, the country in which its preachers are surely at the greatest disadvantage. I confess that I myself would see no great objection in their all going to America, but in their own interest I don't advise them to do that. [Loud laughter.]

[A Representative: *They are selling their belongings right now!*]

No, gentlemen, democracy and socialism are not bound to each other. They are not only different but contrary things. What if democracy were by chance to consist of creating the most pestiferous, most detailed, most restrictive Government of all, the only difference from others being that it was elected by the people and that it acted in the name of the people? In that case what would you have done if not given tyranny an aura of legitimacy that it did not have before, and therefore an omnipotence it lacked? Democracy extends the sphere of individual independence, socialism restricts it. Democracy assigns the greatest possible value to every man, socialism makes man an agent, an instrument, a number. Democracy and socialism are linked by only one word, equality; but note the difference: democracy wants equality in liberty, and socialism wants equality in penury and servitude! [Very good, very good.]

Therefore the February Revolution must not be social—and if it must not be, it is important to have the courage to say so. If it must not be, it must be proclaimed forcefully and loudly, as I am doing here. When one rejects the ends, one must refuse the means; if the goal is unwanted we must not set foot on the road which leads to it. Today, it is proposed that we step out onto that road.

We must not follow the policy long ago recommended by Babeuf, grandfather of all modern socialisms. [Approving laughter.] We must not fall into the snare that he himself pointed out, or rather which was recommended in his name by his his-

torian, friend, and pupil, Buonarroti.<sup>10</sup> It merits reading even fifty years later.

*A Representative:* There is no babouvist here.

*Citizen de Tocqueville:* "The abolition of individual property and the establishment of the great national community was the final goal of his [Babeuf's] labors. But he would refrain from making it the object of a decree on the day after victory; he believed it would be necessary to act in such a way as to cause the entire people to decide to prescribe individual property out of need and out of interest."

Here are the chief prescriptions which he counted on using (it is his own panegyrist who speaks): ". . . legally establish a public order in which proprietors, while provisionally retaining their property, would no longer have either abundance, gratification or consideration; where, forced to expend the greater portion of their income on the costs of cultivation and on taxes, crushed beneath the weight of a progressive tax, driven from public affairs, deprived of all influence, no longer anything but a suspect class of foreigners within the State, they would be forced to emigrate while abandoning their belongings, or be reduced to sanctioning the establishment of the universal community of goods by their own approval."<sup>11</sup> [Laughter.]

*A Representative:* There we are!

<sup>10</sup> François-Noel (Gracchus) Babeuf (1760–1797), a publicist and revolutionist, created a conspiratorial society in 1796 which planned to seize power in order to continue the Revolution. The conspirators were arrested, tried, and condemned. Babeuf was executed. Another conspirator, Filippo Buonarroti (1761–1837), lived to make the conspiracy famous in retrospect as the heir of the radical revolutionary tradition. In 1828 he published a famous biography of Babeuf and the original revolutionary conspiracy. This is the work cited by Tocqueville. After the July Revolution Buonarroti returned to Paris as the acknowledged elder statesman of professional revolutionaries. On Babeuf, see R. R. Palmer, *The Age of the Democratic Revolution*, 2 vols. (Princeton, 1960–1964), II, 231–44, and the October–December 1960 issue of the *Annales historiques de la Révolution française* (no. 162), devoted to the revolutionary and his conspiracy. On Buonarroti see Elizabeth L. Eisenstein, *The First Professional Revolutionist: Filippo Michele Buonarroti (1761–1837)* (Cambridge, Mass., 1959). Largely on the basis of Buonarroti's book, Babeuf was by 1848 the model of the extreme revolutionary.

<sup>11</sup> This refers to Buonarroti's *Conspiration pour l'égalité, dite de Babeuf*, 2 vols. in 1 (Brussels, 1828), I, 310–11.

*Citizen de Tocqueville:* There, gentlemen, is Babeuf's program; with all my heart I do not want it to be that of the February Republic. No, the February Republic must be democratic, but it must not be socialist. . . .

*A Voice on the left:* Yes! [No! No!—*Interruption.*]

*Citizen de Tocqueville:* And if it is not socialist, what then shall it be?

*A Representative on the left:* Royalist!

*Citizen de Tocqueville, turning to that side:* That might occur if you had free reign [*vigorous approval*], but it will not be so.

If the February Revolution is not socialist, what could it then be? Is it a pure accident, as many say and think? Must it be no more than a simple change of men or of laws? I do not think so.

Last January, I spoke in the Chamber of Deputies to the then majority, which grumbled on these benches, for other reasons of course, but in the same way that they grumbled just now.<sup>12</sup> [*Very good! Very good!*] [*The speaker points to the left.*]

I said, beware, the revolutionary wind is rising—don't you feel it? Revolutions are coming, don't you see them? We are on a volcano. I said that, the *Moniteur* testifies to it. And why did I say it? . . . [*Interruption on the left.*]

Was I feeble-minded enough to believe that revolutions were coming because this or that man was in power, because this or that incident of political life stirred the country momentarily? No, gentlemen. What made me believe that revolutions were coming, what, in fact, produced the Revolution, was this: I saw that by a profound derogation of the most sacred principles propagated to the world by the French Revolution, power, influence, honors, in short, life itself, had been restricted within the very narrow limits of a single class! There was not a country in the world which presented a single comparable example. Even in aristocratic England, the England which we then so often and mistakenly took as an example and model, even in aristocratic England the people participated, if not completely and directly,

<sup>12</sup> Tocqueville is referring to his last speech during the July Monarchy on January 27, 1848. In it he warned the Chamber that a crisis was imminent. The speed with which his prediction came true surprised even its author and he had it reprinted to good effect after the fact.

at least extensively and indirectly in public affairs. If it did not itself vote (and it did often vote), it made its voice heard. It made its will known to those who governed. There was communication between them.

Here, there was nothing like it. I repeat, all rights, all power, all influence, all distinctions, the whole of political life, was confined within an extremely narrow class, and below that, nothing!

This is what made me think that the Revolution was at our gates. I saw that, within that small privileged class, there occurred what always occurs in the long run in small, exclusive aristocracies. Public life was extinguished, corruption grew daily, intrigue took the place of public virtues, everything was diminishing and deteriorating. So much for the elite.

And what was happening in the depths? Beneath was what was called the legal country, the people properly so called; the people—less maltreated than is admitted (since we must be very just to fallen leaders), but to whom too little thought was given—the people lived, so to speak, outside the whole official sphere, creating a life of its own. Psychologically and intellectually severed from those who were allowed to lead it, the people confided naturally in those who were in contact with it. And many of them were either those vain utopians about which we just spoke, or dangerous demagogues.

Because I saw these two classes, one small and the other numerous, slowly alienated from one another, the one filled with jealousy, defiance, and anger, the other filled with thoughtlessness and sometimes egoism and insensibility; because I saw these two classes moving in isolation and in contradictory directions, I said, and had the right to say, that revolutionary winds were rising and Revolution was coming. [*Very good!*]

Was the February Revolution made to achieve something like that? No, gentlemen, I don't think so. I as much as any of you think the contrary. I desire the contrary; I desire it not only in the interest of freedom but in the interest of public security.

I confess that I myself did not work for the February Revolution and I have no right to say so. But since the Revolution is accomplished, I want it to be a true revolution, because I want it to be the last. I know that only true revolutions endure. An unproductive revolution, whose womb is barren, can serve only

one purpose, that of giving birth to many more revolutions to come. [Agreement.]

So I want the February Revolution to have a meaning, a clear, precise, perceptible meaning that blazes before the world for everyone to see.

And what is this meaning? I put it in a sentence: the February Revolution must be the true continuation, the real and sincere execution of the aim of the French Revolution—it must be the fulfillment of what our fathers could only think about. [Hearty approval.]

*Citizen Ledru-Rollin:* I request permission to speak.

*Citizen de Tocqueville:* The February Revolution had willed that there be no classes. Not that it ever entertained the idea of dividing citizens in society, as you do, into proprietors and proletarians. You won't find those warlike and hate-charged words among its great documents. The French Revolution desired that there be no classes; the Restoration and the July Monarchy desired the opposite. We have to will what our fathers willed.

The Revolution had willed that public burdens be equal, really equal, for all citizens. It failed in that. The distribution of public burdens has remained unequal in certain areas. We must see to it that they are equalized. On this point we must still will what our fathers willed, and execute what they were unable to. [Very good!]

As I have already said, the French Revolution did not ridiculously pretend to create a social power which would itself directly create each citizen's fortune, welfare, and conveniences of life, which would substitute a highly questionable governmental wisdom for the practical and self-interested wisdom of the governed. It believed that it had sufficiently fulfilled its task in giving education and freedom to every citizen. [Very good!]

It had what you seem to lack, the strong, noble, proud belief that for an honest and courageous man, knowledge and liberty are quite sufficient so that he need ask for nothing more from his governors.

The Revolution willed this. It lacked the time and the means to do it. We must will it and do it.

Finally, the French Revolution desired—this desire is what

made it not only sacred but holy in the eyes of the world—it desired, I say, to introduce charity into politics. It developed a higher, broader, more general idea than that previously held of the State's obligations toward the poor, toward the suffering citizen.

We must recapture this idea, using all means at the State's disposal, not, I repeat, by substituting the State's foresight and wisdom for the individual's foresight and wisdom, but by coming to the rescue of all who suffer, of all, who, after having exhausted all their resources, would be reduced to misery if the State did not lend a hand.

This is what the French Revolution wanted to do. This is what we ourselves must do.

Is there any socialism in all of this?

*On the left:* Yes! Yes! It is nothing but!

*Citizen de Tocqueville:* No! No! No, there is no socialism there, only Christian charity applied to politics; there is nothing there. . . .

[*Interruption.*]

*The President of the Assembly:* It is as clear as day that you disagree; you don't share his opinion; you will mount the tribune. But don't interrupt.

*Citizen de Tocqueville:* Nothing in socialism gives laborers a right *vis-à-vis* the State. Nothing obliges the State to insert itself in place of individual foresight, in place of thrift, of individual probity; nothing there authorizes the State to meddle with industries, to impose regulations on them, to tyrannize the individual in order to better govern him, or, as is insolently asserted, to save him from himself. Here is nothing but Christianity applied to polities.

Yes, the February Revolution must be Christian and democratic; but it must not be socialist. These words summarize my whole thought, and I end by pronouncing them. [*Very good! Very good!*]<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Tocqueville's speech was answered by Ledru-Rollin. The Amendment in favor of the right to work was finally rejected by a vote of 396 to 187.